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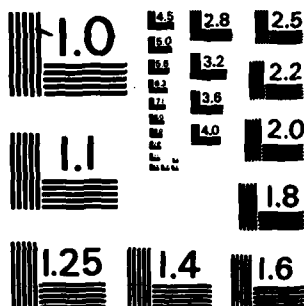
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Kevin N. Lewis

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# NUCLEAR WEAPONS POLICY, PLANNING, AND WAR OBJECTIVES: TOWARD A THEATER-ORIENTED DETERRENT STRATEGY

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## CONFRONTING THE NUCLEAR DILEMMA

The U.S. strategic nuclear policy debate has for years been marked by confusion and chaos. Despite the investment of considerable analytic effort, planners remain deeply divided on basic issues relating to budgets, force structure choices, employment strategies, arms control concepts, and the like. Unfortunately, it is unlikely that this confusion will be sorted out, at least given the way that the nuclear defense problem is currently framed. No answers seem likely because a basic dilemma stymies attempts to resolve strategic questions using traditional methods of defense planning.

This basic dilemma is as follows. On the one hand, nuclear weapons cannot serve national objectives in the same ways that other military forces can. On the other hand, like it or not, both the United States and Soviet Union maintain large nuclear forces, and, for reasons I will list in a moment, it is imperative to plan for their use. Consider the elements of this dilemma.

As defense planners, our task is to develop a model that explains how our armed forces can help us attain favorable military outcomes,

\* The views expressed in this paper are the author's and do not necessarily reflect those of Rand or its sponsors. The author thanks Professor William W. Kaufmann of MIT for his remarks on an earlier draft of this paper, and James Thomson of Rand for his comments on a more recent version.



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defined in an overall campaign sense. Historically, a "favorable military outcome" in full-scale war has meant destruction of the enemy's military capabilities so that he is unable to seriously threaten his adversaries' security and defend things of value to himself. At that point, the defeated power can be forced to accept terms or to face destruction.

But with nuclear weapons and modern means for their delivery, it has been apparent since at least the mid-1950s that even a badly beaten "loser" could inflict grievous damage on the other side. In other words, a nuclear war would be different in kind from previous wars, insofar as combatant nations face annihilation *even as their armed forces remain intact*. Because we can not *guarantee* the termination of nuclear fighting on our terms, we must admit the possibility that war could so damage American society that all conservative national objectives would be eclipsed. In this way, planning for nuclear defense is qualitatively unlike military planning in the past.

However, since at least at the present time efforts to completely remove the nuclear threat to each side by negotiated or other means seem to be fruitless, it is essential that we develop reasonable plans for the use of nuclear weapons and efficient programs for the maintenance of a capable and balanced nuclear arsenal, for several reasons.

First, we are not only concerned with deterring attacks on U.S. society--we are also responsible for the defense of vital overseas U.S. interests and allies, and nuclear forces play a key role in that defense. Second, careful (and evident) preparation is necessary so that our forces appear organized, demonstrably effective and responsive, and

thereby act as a strong deterrent--and not a temptation--to enemy adventures. Third, we need real plans and information about forces in order to evaluate our systems, test the safety of procedures (such as those that govern authority over nuclear release), and identify areas for future posture development. Fourth, and most important, even if one cannot be convinced that nuclear weapons make possible any relationship other than one of grim stalemate between the U.S. and Soviet Union, the foundation of that stalemate must be a range of military options and capabilities, for the simple reason that there can be no certainty that the Soviets see the nuclear defense problem as we do.

Because we have not been able to bridge the basic nuclear dilemma with a suitable compromise, planning suffers. Yet while consensus exists on the need to improve nuclear planning, remedial efforts seem doomed because they generally ignore one side or the other of the dilemma. Their conclusions are therefore invalid and dangerous. Unless we are to base our force, employment, and other policy choices on caricatures of the possible forms a nuclear war could take, a new approach to strategy must be devised. Since there may be no way of finessing the dilemma, "surrogates" for an integrated set of national nuclear strategy objectives are needed.

How should these surrogate aims be expressed? The prevailing view holds that there should be two components to a surrogate strategy. First, "deterrence of major Soviet aggression" remains the primary stated purpose of U.S. nuclear power. And second, should the need to use nuclear weapons emerge, it is said that we should order our forces to "pursue national aims, while controlling the risks of escalation."

Unfortunately, these statements provide little in the way of practical guidance for day-to-day planning. It is difficult, on the basis of such vague rhetoric, to justify particular spending levels for the nuclear forces, revise war planning guidelines, and so on. Since this and other popular surrogates do not confront the basic dilemma of nuclear strategy head on, we are not much better off than if we admitted that we had no idea at all how to plan for nuclear defense.

#### THE MASSIVE DETERRENT CONCEPT IN U.S. STRATEGY

As complicated and confusing as the situation may be, nuclear defense planning nonetheless goes forward. Lacking an appropriate surrogate strategy of how nuclear weapons can support national aims, operational planning generally defaults to traditional but, as we shall see, irrelevant rules of thumb. For the most part, these rules can be characterized under the rubric of a doctrine of massive deterrence.

This doctrine, which holds that the ultimate threat of massive urban/industrial damage in response to major Soviet aggression will deter Soviet attack, *can* lead straightforwardly to congruent sets of plans and forces.[1] However, these forces and plans quickly become disconnected from broader U.S. political and military considerations. Although occasional attempts have been made to reconnect planning activities by trying to install a capability to carry out meaningful limited attacks, for over three decades now the massive deterrent's

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[1] The forces required can be easily computed on the basis of numbers of targets, overall probability that given types of forces can destroy them (given guidance about desired damage levels), and so on. Such an arsenal can be coordinated by an intricate single war plan in which uncertainties related to more flexible fighting do not figure greatly.



dominance has not been substantially weakened. Historical tendency, existing and programmed force attributes, and U.S. theoretical inclinations virtually guarantee that this orientation will persist.

Even though the massive deterrent doctrine has caused no end of trouble, it continues to be popular mainly because it is consistent with the widespread impression in the United States that there can be no standard for planning success, save "no nuclear wars." Many Americans actually perceive the U.S. and USSR to be in league against an imaginary mutual foe, nuclear devastation. The assumption here, of course, is that *any* nuclear fighting would escalate into total, or almost total, war. According to this view, anything that draws us into such a risky game on any pretense--particularly the notion that a nuclear war could be controlled--is said to be madness. Taking this analysis a step further, arrangements for nuclear use other than those prescribed by the purest forms of the massive deterrent school cannot be justified.

Many analysts have been dissatisfied with this approach to deterrence, however, primarily on the grounds that it treats only one side of the basic dilemma. To handle the other question of U.S. aims if deterrence fails, a variant of this strategy has been proposed. Some would say that by a combination of strategic defenses and offensive power, one side could unleash a thorough, coordinated first strike, ideally catching enemy forces on the ground and damaging them to the extent that active and civil defenses could mitigate the effects of enemy retaliation. Such an attack could, in theory, create a relative nuclear monopoly (or at least a force balance so tilted) that the side striking first could dictate terms. Here, some would argue, is a way of

restoring the traditional notion of a "favorable military outcome" in the modern thermonuclear context.

Consequently, an approach to nuclear planning has emerged that basically treats the nuclear battle as though it were an independent air superiority campaign. This approach enjoys considerable popularity because it includes at least a theoretical concept of victory, if only in this spun-off, set-piece war. For this reason, much effort has been devoted to computing the prerequisites of "splendid" counterforce attacks, and much anxiety results when certain balance indicators creep in one direction or another.

But the most cursory inspection discloses a number of profound difficulties with this alternative view of nuclear war: difficulties so serious that this variant seems as much of a dead-end street as the other. True, if one side enjoyed dramatic, overwhelming superiority in both counterforce and related damage-limiting capabilities, it could in principle threaten to drop its opponents through a trap door at relatively "acceptable" cost. Such a misbalance is not a theoretical construction: it can be argued that the United States did hold something resembling this margin of superiority for at least a brief interval in the early 1960s.[2]

[2] Between roughly 1961 and 1964, the U.S. probably enjoyed the greatest relative nuclear advantage it ever held over the USSR. U.S. offensive forces included more than 2000 heavy and medium bombers, in addition to a variety of tactical land and carrier-based air forces, and several types of ballistic and cruise missiles based on land and at sea. In a coordinated attack, these forces would have had little trouble overwhelming a mainly day-only Soviet air defense network. At the same time, the counterforce target set in the Soviet Union ran to a few dozen aimpoints. Early Soviet intercontinental missiles were hard to hold on alert and unreliable. Soviet SLBMs were also unreliable and inaccurate, and those subs had to surface to fire. And Long Range Aviation bombers, if they survived, would have had to penetrate U.S. homeland defenses

But what is also clear is that if such a true "window of vulnerability" ever were to exist on either side, the other could swiftly neutralize it by imposing unacceptably large uncertainties and costs on enemy planning with such techniques as resorting to protected, mobile, or concealed strategic launchers. Furthermore, a prerequisite to victory under this model would be a first strike--but early warning and intelligence might give the adversary a preemption or launch-under-attack option. To be fully successful, such a strike would probably also have to be delivered against an *unalerted* enemy posture--and this above all is difficult to imagine, at least in a real political setting. Finally, an inferior nuclear power can mobilize alternative counters to superior central nuclear capability. For example, even at the zenith of U.S. nuclear superiority, the USSR could have blasted key U.S. allies in Europe and Asia with so-called theater nuclear weapons and conventional forces almost as severely as U.S. central strategic forces could have damaged the USSR.

In short, if the enemy chooses to compete, "war winning" in this sense may be financially, not to mention politically and morally, a bottomless pit. Evidently, the deficiencies of such a strategy have been so apparent to U.S. planners that even at the height of American nuclear superiority the United States is said not even to have seriously considered such an operation.[3] Apparently, the futility of attempting to

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consisting of more than 100 SAM batteries and about 2000 interceptors.  
[3] See Kevin N. Lewis, *Planning Nuclear Defense: Force Structures, Employment Plans, and War Objectives*, unpublished doctoral dissertation, Department of Political Science, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1980, page 316. It is also revealing that "it seems highly likely (during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis) that the Soviet leaders did something that U.S. leaders, as I know from my own experience, did only in more general terms--that is, ask their military just how a nuclear exchange

preserve (or attain) this state of superiority over the long-run led Secretary McNamara in the mid-1960s to try to persuade the USSR not to adjust the strategic balance to its liking but rather to let the troubled strategy question lie in peace--to accept as sufficient the stand-off ensured by "mutual assured destruction" (MAD) capabilities.

### DANGERS OF THE TRADITIONAL AMERICAN APPROACH

Yet McNamara's argument for mutual assured destruction lacked an essential component that must be provided by any new strategic framework seeking to displace it. As both sides acquired powerful forces that could in effect "ride out" an enemy strike (such as *Polaris* and *Yankee* missile-launching subs), mutual deterrence was strengthened. These weapons essentially removed even the theoretical possibility that either side could disarm the other and win a nuclear war. But the MAD theory continued to beg the question of what U.S. forces should attempt to do if war were to break out.

True, in peacetime, it doesn't matter--indeed, there is no way for an enemy to know--where our weapons are really aimed. But here we surely assume a terrible risk. Suppose that war *did* occur, as a result of a Soviet attack, an accident, miscalculation, or some other cause. What orders should be passed to the forces then? Do nothing--possibly ensuring a conventional war debacle? Hit all targets in a single reflexive blow--precipitating mutual annihilation? Concentrate on enemy offensive forces that would, for the most part, escape destruction? Or might some other missions make more sense?

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might come out." See Paul Nitze, "Assuring Strategic Stability in an Age of Detente," *Foreign Affairs*, January 1976, page 216.

For more than two decades, the need to provide some degree of insurance against a failure of deterrence has prompted U.S. planners to work on alternatives to strategies based on massive retaliatory attacks. Generally speaking, all of these approaches have sought to divide up a single-shot U.S. nuclear war plan into a collection of interlocking options. In the 1960s, for instance, certain nuclear targets were culled out of the large plan and special "counterforce" options emerged. (In addition, NATO defense was reorganized under a doctrine called "flexible response.") Throughout the 1970s, war plans were broken up even more, and expanded series of intercontinental and theater nuclear selective employment options were constructed.

The basic force motivating the creation of richer option menus was the desire to insert extra rungs in a hypothetical "escalation ladder" said to lie between the onset of war and all-out holocaust. As such, the rationale for selective employment strategies was more defensive than offensive: the linkage of limited options to massive attacks--and not what might be called the military gains to be realized by selective employment--remained the driving force behind our increasingly partitioned war plans. Although planners scrounged for options, it was still hoped that a massive deterrent would remain the final backstop to any excursions in the U.S. plan. Hence, the vague requirement to "limit damage while pursuing military aims."

Although the new concepts have consistently failed to explain exactly what wartime jobs should be done, most people have reconciled themselves to the notion that trying to stay near the bottom of the "escalation ladder," (presumably by confining attacks to packages of

appropriate military targets), is the best we can do given the basic dilemma of nuclear planning. I believe, though, that it is exceedingly dangerous to base our nuclear strategy on the fundamental assumption that in the last analysis the United States and Soviet Union act as cooperative, if not noncompetitive, allies, their mutual objective being the avoidance of nuclear war--or, should it occur, of escalation beyond very limited use--by tying all actions ultimately to massive retaliatory attacks. While it is easy to sympathize with and understand the origins of this dogma, strict adherence to it may subject us to grave risks and extra costs for at least three reasons.

First, such an approach mistakenly substitutes arbitrary rules for the requirement to think seriously about nuclear contingencies and war-time goals, obscuring the fact that, without some reasonable surrogate strategy, neither our force structure nor employment choices are likely to be very rewarding. To the detriment of planning, if one favors the massive deterrent approach, arms control, declaratory statements, unilateral demonstrations of moderation and restraint, and so on, tend to take precedence over the force structure and employment determinants of the U.S. nuclear posture.

The same is true if one begins with the proposition of an independent nuclear air battle or a tit-for-tat "limited nuclear war." We can indeed use certain aggregate damage criteria to build suitable forces and plans in the context of these stylized exchanges, but nothing about these indicators helps us balance and make tradeoffs between nuclear forces and other kinds of defense capabilities for the sake of overall DoD budget and strategy planning.

Once we embrace either of those escapist philosophies, in other words, our planning process will be disconnected and only by chance will our strategic posture be efficient, appropriate in the eyes of those nations that rely on our military strength, useful and agile in emergencies, and robust in the face of the external perturbations and uncertainties with which planners must daily contend. The general feeling that nuclear forces deep down can never be instruments of military and political power for us or anyone else is bound to be a self-fulfilling prophesy: if no planning (beyond the rote activities carried out in support of massive deterrent-based strategies) is done, no benefits of planning can be reaped.

Second, though it does not matter much in the case of a MAD deterrent policy, no strategy put forward to date says just how a thermonuclear conflict can be ended before realistic national aims are eclipsed by the sheer devastation that can befall either side. Even if things work out for us (and, perhaps, especially if they do), it is not clear that we can easily induce the enemy to quit. And even if nuclear fighting could be assuredly controlled and stopped, no one has explained how our gains in a strategic nuclear war could be parlayed into a reversal of enemy progress in the theater battle. Thus, suppose during a losing NATO-Pact war we pull off a brilliant counterforce strike. What then? Buzz the Kremlin in a bomber and urge the Soviets to give back Western Europe? Because our separate strategic nuclear gains may be unrelated to the goals over which we will have become involved in fighting, it is not clear, at least in the present framework, that we will have the leverage to force an end to fighting or even will recognize the cues that

tell us how near or far we are to success in the theater campaign.

The third serious problem is that the success of historic U.S. nuclear concepts has relied heavily on the enemy's ability to discern our purposes and on his adherence to a similar strategy. But such a presumption overlooks the fact that the United States and Soviet Union may not see strategy in the same light. This particular situation could be a very precarious one. That the Soviets understand our beliefs may not only be desirable, but essential *if U.S. nuclear strikes do not seem to the Soviets to be related to tangible theater war aims*. For example, nuclear "shots across the bow" to demonstrate U.S. resolve may only lead to catastrophe if they provide the excuse for the Soviets to unleash a large-scale countermilitary attack.

Because of this third problem, all of the grandiose questions of strategy boil down to the simple determination of how much we think we can afford to bet that our adversary sees things the same way we do. Yet as we shall see below, both Soviet doctrinal declarations and day-to-day actions suggest that we cannot really afford to be very high rollers in this regard. They seem to view nuclear war in a different way, one that could imply serious risks given typical American preconceptions.

To hedge against that dire possibility, a new approach to U.S. strategy design must be devised and implemented. As a starting point, any proper surrogate strategy should *not* do two things. First, it must not at its best foreordain "victory" or, more likely, stalemate only in tandem with the ultimate risk of total catastrophe. Second, because we cannot predict why and how wars will be fought, our war plans and forces



should not be based on canned contingencies and rigid assumptions. The foundation of a new surrogate strategy for U.S. nuclear planning must be flexibility in employment and force planning. For flexibility alone--and no amount of foresight or technology--can forestall calamity.

Starting from the basic premise that flexibility must guide planning, we can proceed to develop a new surrogate strategy. Our success in devising that new doctrine depends on our ability to answer two critical questions. First, to the extent that the question can be answered at all, how do the Soviets approach nuclear defense planning? Second, in light of those views, how should U.S. operational war aims be described? Though the United States may have no sound and unimpeachable doctrine, what threats and capabilities will deter the Soviets, and should deterrence collapse, how, specifically, can we go about the task of "pursuing military aims, while controlling escalation"?

#### THE SOVIET FACTOR AND U.S. STRATEGY

Let us begin with possible Soviet perceptions of the military role of nuclear weapons. Not surprisingly, as I noted above, U.S. leaders have always tried to induce the USSR to respond to the basic nuclear dilemma the way we do: to collaborate against the common enemy, nuclear devastation. At the very dawn of the atomic age, for instance, one scholar wrote that "If both sides in a conflict have enough atomic bombs to wipe out the others' cities, they are in approximately equal position even if one has three times more bombs than the other." [4] A decade later, and shortly after the USSR began to acquire an intercontinental retaliatory

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[4] Professor Eugene Rabinowich, cited in *Life Magazine*, 29 October 1945, p. 46.

capability, President Eisenhower began to speak of an inevitable "parity" between the arsenals of the U.S. and USSR and, accordingly, the erosion of any combat utility that these weapons may have ever had. As noted earlier, Secretary of Defense McNamara tried ten years later to school the USSR in the advantages of Mutual Assured Destruction. And finally, the administration's official in charge of such policy told the Soviets in 1976 that "When each side has thousands of launchers and many more warheads, a decisive or politically significant margin of superiority is out of reach." [5]

Yet however much we have belabored lessons of balance, parity, and lack of utility of nuclear weapons, the Soviets have proved delinquent pupils. If the Soviets did maintain forces capable *only* of assured destruction attacks the issue of flexibility would be moot; but alarming evidence suggests a very different Soviet view on the nature of nuclear warfare. [6] For one thing, the USSR has steadily acquired nuclear forces capable of fairly refined operations. Another indication of dissimilar Soviet thinking is the substantially higher level of Soviet strategic spending and the consistency of Soviet strategic force developments. The Soviet inclination toward comprehensive active and civil defenses and certain bothersome operational capabilities (such as silo reuse) likewise reflect a view of nuclear war that does not neglect the need to rationalize nuclear use in pursuit of grand strategic outcomes. On the face value of these external developments alone, abandoning our efforts

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[5] Henry Kissinger, speech given in Dallas, Texas on 22 March 1976, reprinted in *Department of State Bulletin*.

[6] Of course, it is important to note that the NATO-Warsaw Pact conventional balance at this point should not be overwhelmingly disadvantageous to the West.

to moderate the strategic competition by appealing to the Soviets' better nature seems to be in order.

Even more ominous in some ways are Soviet declaratory statements on nuclear war. In particular, the Soviets do not, at least in their doctrinal utterances, isolate nuclear employment from other military actions. They do not, therefore, seem to recognize the existence of either an overarching final deterrent that has a presumed effect all down the escalation line or an independent nuclear air battle; nor do they think much of what are often derided as bourgeois concepts of "selective use," "escalation control," and so on. Yet, though much of Soviet declaratory policy can be properly dismissed as custom, U.S. planners must be concerned that the USSR does in some sense harbor notions about "prevailing" after a nuclear war (in the same way as one might think about prevailing after conventional military action) or could at the least bring itself to accept such notions in an emergency.

Whether or not this possibility is a realistic one is hotly debated by two opposing schools of thought on the motivations of Soviet leadership. The first school discounts the Soviet Union as a potential aggressor or even opportunist in the nuclear realm. Assuming that nuclear employment can never be justified, such use seemingly could only be the result of accident or madness. Although these risks are as worthy of our attention as many others, the fact is that should the Soviets feel differently about the use of nuclear forces as genuine instruments of conflict, the consequences of a superpower confrontation could be disaster.[7]

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[7] For one discussion of the problem of accidental war, consult Fred C. Ikle, "Can Nuclear Deterrence Last Out the Century?" California

Explanations favoring this essentially benign view are: (1) Soviet strategic progress as a symptom of paranoia and overcompensation for perceived external threats, (2) constant and dynamic force innovations as a result of Soviet internal politics, (3) excessive effort to hedge against supposed chronic Soviet technical shortcomings (e.g., poor missile reliability), and (4) routine but lagged actions to reverse earlier U.S. strides that produced a state of intolerable American advantage.

Whether or not these claims have any basis in fact--and in several instances, the case for the argument is quite lame--it is interesting that none of this school's explanations impute any specific operational objectives to Soviet activities: Soviet force developments are said to be the result of factors that have nothing to do with anything resembling a military plan. In this respect, perceptions of past and expectations of future Soviet strategic programs and capabilities attribute to the USSR virtually a mirror-imaged American-style disconnection between forces, plans, and the set of military objectives, private and public, to which the Kremlin may aspire. In particular, this view fails to allow for the possibility that the Soviets have their own surrogate strategy for nuclear force employment.

Although none too instructive about their motives, history does caution against assuming that Soviet strategy is a direct likeness of our own. Taking the often ominous evidence into account, the second school of thought essentially interprets Soviet occupations as guided by an unfailingly rational agency, in the sense that the Soviet Union

vigorously implements courses of action devised to pursue explicit political goals in a timely way. The so-called "rational model" of Soviet behavior does seem to be a fairly useful basis for U.S. planning, given the frequently conflicting nature of the ambitions that should guide the defense preparations of the two superpowers.

Regrettably, most assessments based on this theory of Soviet behavior do not accurately account for important but routine planning shortcomings such as inaccurate threat assessment, devotion to dogma, and deflection of the force structure (even the design of individual weapon systems) because of political and other uncontrollable influences. As a result, most of this school's discussion of Soviet intentions and aims descends either to sloganeering and abstract speculation about "theories of war" and "military doctrines and styles," or to excessive taxonomization of Soviet initiatives, rather than to efforts that realistically characterize the historical development of Soviet forces and plans and their relationship to possible Soviet strategies. Because members of this second school often prejudice their case by imputing dazzling levels of efficiency, sophistication, and cunning to Soviet efforts, the "rational" view of Soviet planning is sometimes equivalent to an alarmist view of Soviet behavior.

Out of a vast literature on Soviet strategic aims, a few excellent analyses persuasively argue an intermediate course: that Soviet activities reflect a sincere, if often troubled, effort to buy forces designed to undertake certain key missions.[8] It is this third possibility--that

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[8] For instance, Benjamin S. Lambeth, *Risk and Uncertainty in Soviet Deliberations on War*, The Rand Corporation, R-2687, October 1981; B. Lambeth, "The Evolving Soviet Strategic Threat," *Current History*, October, 1975; and Herbert Goldhamer, *The Soviet Union in a Period of*

some unified and coherent Soviet strategy exists, and, within realistic margins, that it can be translated into forces and plans--that should be at the source of current U.S. and Allied consternation over Soviet activities. The existence of such a strategy should be alarming because it is evidence that we could face--and must therefore plan to defeat--a nuclear threat based on a body of Soviet surrogate nuclear strategy.

Thus, the "intermediate" explanation of the Soviet view of nuclear planning has the following two virtues. First, it assumes that Soviet planning may not be totally foiled by the strategic dilemma: the Soviets seem to have determined and acted on the conclusion that meaningful surrogate strategies are essential. And while Soviet planners may not view the strategic dilemma as solvable, in the sense that a nuclear war can be "won," they might believe that in a nuclear contingency Soviet nuclear forces should do something that supports their continuing military goals. Those strikes may not further all national aims in the traditional sense. What is implied here is simply that a good surrogate strategy facilitates the pursuit of "least unacceptable" outcomes in an awful situation.[9]

Second, this view indicates that nuclear employment should not be inconsistent with the rest of the war. Segregating nuclear campaigns from conventional theater war seems to be an American deviation, not a Soviet one. The Soviets devised their own nuclear concepts in the absence of an independent strategic bombing tradition. Indeed, Soviet

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*Strategic Parity*, The Rand Corporation, R-889, November 1971.

[9] See Benjamin S. Lambeth, *Selective Nuclear Options in American and Soviet Strategic Policy*, The Rand Corporation, R-2034, December 1976.

doctrinal writings, so often murky and contradictory, are distinctly unanimous in their rejection of the independent bombing campaign concept that has driven Western planning. To the contrary, the USSR has viewed nuclear weapons in a supporting role, and in Soviet doctrine there is no *independent nuclear war to be fought*.

In short, the intermediate view of Soviet strategy describes a philosophy quite unlike American thinking. The currently popular impression that the trappings of Soviet nuclear doctrine imply that the USSR's leadership enthusiastically subscribes to a "war winning" strategy is unlikely to be valid and is not generally supported by available evidence. The USSR has been and undoubtedly will remain as cautious as the U.S. in preventing nuclear showdowns. The intermediate model simply says that the Soviets may have devised a sound surrogate strategy and therefore may approach the nuclear problem in a different way than we do.

#### TOWARD A U.S. SURROGATE STRATEGY

I noted above that it is unclear whether traditional U.S. nuclear war models, with their stereotyped sequential exchanges, rounds of damage assessment, and perhaps negotiation, can be given much practical value. If for no other reason than prudence, Soviet activities require that we develop operational statements of general war objectives in terms other than those that apply in the so-called major contingencies. Yet the vague goals of "detering war and stopping fighting at the earliest possible moment on favorable terms" persist as the only ones that can gain any degree of consensus. Thus, what better guidance for a U.S. surrogate strategy might we issue?

The best course seems to be development of a strategy that enables us to respond effectively and promptly to enemy attacks against U.S. regional interests important enough to involve nuclear forces. In other words, if we cannot have nuclear war objectives in a traditional sense, we should plan as if our nuclear forces could support our conventional forces in those theater contingencies for which the United States routinely prepares. True, nuclear weapons have not been and will not be easily integrable into planning for wars fought over realistic theater aims; under the circumstances, it is best to prepare to meet enemy challenges by traditional means. But if worse comes to worst, because continuing deterrence and defeat of an enemy invasion will remain the nation's leading goals even after nuclear weapons are used, the advantages of nuclear employment options designed to contain fighting within the most limited theater boundaries are clear.

I propose the following three principles to guide the detailed preparation of a U.S. surrogate strategy for offensive nuclear employment. First, nuclear employment will not occur independent of other kinds of military action. Rather, nuclear weapons will probably be brought into play after conventional fighting has already escalated to a significant level. Nuclear employment should be related to that fighting.[10] U.S. nuclear forces should be specifically designed and targeted to support U.S. and allied general purpose forces. Because tactical requirements cannot be determined in advance, rapid option planning and

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[10] This goes for all nuclear weapons, whatever titles they bear. There is no real distinction between "strategic" and "tactical" nuclear weapons, but we can talk about the tactical nuclear use of all kinds of weapons.



force retargeting capabilities are vital. Given the nature of the theater defense problem, our forces should be prompt, very accurate and reliable, and carry the lowest yields possible.

Second, unless the cause of a crisis or attack is attributable to an accident, the enemy will have launched his aggression to achieve concrete military and political goals. From what we know about Soviet decision-making, it is likely that the USSR's decision to strike will follow the most careful consideration of the costs and risks, as well as the payoffs of action. These deliberations are precisely the ones that we should attempt to influence by our statements and preparations before trouble starts. Taking into account the importance of traditional general purpose force objectives to the Soviets, our declaratory, readiness, basing, and force policies must stress the theater orientation of the U.S. nuclear arsenal.

Third, both sides must assume that there are many ways to call nuclear bluffs. Though they may rattle missiles from time to time, neither superpower will idly threaten the use of nuclear weapons, for both know the long-term dangers of making unfelicitous, hollow threats.[11] Cavalier references to a final nuclear sanction must be avoided, and full political and budgetary attention should be devoted to the conventional forces.

Planning based on these three principles would best orient the U.S. posture in light of known Soviet strategic aims and would provide a

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[11] The worst of these, of course, is the possibility that at some point in a conflict an enemy may inadvertently precipitate execution of our urban/industrial attack reserve, with disastrous consequences for all.

sound basis for flexible nuclear employment in support of allied theater war objectives. Such a new approach would mean substantially revising concepts now derived from a massive deterrent strategy. To limit war in the manner I have described here implies not only that we use limited means but that we also maintain only limited objectives--even in a major theater battle. But this notion is contrary to our historic practice of building our deterrent around all-out objectives. Even when we devised limited options in the past, we have connected these with massive attacks by disavowing reliable control over escalation once fighting has started and by demanding that execution of limited attacks does not undermine full-scale attack effectiveness.[12]

Yet the more powerful the USSR becomes in its conventional and nuclear forces, the more offensive nuclear flexibility we need. That is, we must be able to achieve practical theater ends in addition to being able to head off catastrophe, if at all possible. By explicitly tying forces to limited objectives that we could otherwise achieve with larger conventional military forces, we may not only accomplish key tactical goals--we would achieve a better grasp on the serious problem of

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[12] Historically, the lack of apparent means for regaining control over escalation has profoundly influenced U.S. strategic force structure, employment, and arms control planning. Because the twin endgame goals of attaining meaningful combat leverage and avoiding excessively destructive fighting are so antagonistic, most strategists have feared that we may have very little control over the evolution of a nuclear war. This is not a new problem: the so-called McNamara and Schlesinger targeting reforms had far less to do with military consequences of limited strikes than with developing employment packages that could help to avert heavy damage to the U.S. if war did break out. Nathan Leites, "Once More What We Should Not Do Even in the Worst Case: the Assured Destruction Attack," California Seminar on Arms Control and Foreign Policy, Santa Monica California, June 1974, traces U.S. thinking in this regard.

managing the nuclear war "endgame." Fighting is most likely to be kept under control if, by altering the theater balance, we can persuade the enemy to desist from his local aggression.

It is worth expanding this point a little further. Relevant historical experience demonstrates that deterrence will be most resilient if there is a high probability that the indicated response or retaliation is proportional to the issues at stake and therefore is, with some reasonable likelihood, a realistic and appropriate option. If, however, the actual means for supporting an intended deterrent threat are lacking, an enemy may tend to ignore that threat. Similarly, if our declaratory policy has seemed logically inconsistent or vague before the fact, an enemy may be more likely to act, especially when he is under pressure and less able to think through complicated issues.

Thus, adversaries who calculate that the United States is able and willing to respond in a measured way at all levels of conflict will be at least as deterred as enemies who are threatened with total destruction if they trespass U.S. interests. Accordingly, the U.S. nuclear posture must be designed so that "the Soviet Union, applying its own standards and models, would recognize that no plausible outcome would represent victory on any possible definition of victory." [13] In short, even if the United States can discern no obvious way by which nuclear weapons can be used to further military aims, our strategy should be to ensure that the USSR does not either, or if it does, that by means of limited and selective employment, we can force Soviet leadership to abandon their strat-

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[13] Walter Slocombe, "The Countervailing Strategy," *International Security*, Vol. 5, No. 4, Spring 1981.

egy of continued aggression in pursuit of its objectives. Since Soviet calculations will be driven primarily by their campaign aims, the strategy described here will help ensure by nuclear employment, if necessary, that no theater "victory" can be realized.

The chief objective of this policy--deterrence of Soviet conventional or nuclear attack (in regions of unambiguous interest to the U.S.), by conveying to the USSR the warning that the U.S. maintains the wherewithal to undo or block the hostile action under Kremlin consideration--begins to form the core of a useful surrogate strategy. In particular, such a strategy would advise the USSR that we might use nuclear weapons to defeat large theater attacks that could not be handled in other ways. Because the scope and tempo of the war would be determined by the initial Soviet aggression, most of the escalatory risk would rest on their shoulders. Since under this policy we would be ready to defeat whatever escalatory moves the Soviets may have in mind, we would be most able to keep fighting under control. Hence, this surrogate concept both supports our campaign aims and does not tie us to complete escalation.

This new U.S. strategy would differ from other recently promoted or implied ones in at least six respects. First, under the new approach, the U.S. should not depend on first strike or tactical warning. These relics of the historical massive deterrent strategy can probably be discarded. In addition to posing operational risks, they also create perverse incentives for enemy planners and undermine our declared intention to meet realistic (and that hardly suggests "bolt from the blue") theater threats.

Second, the strategy does not take "war-winning" (in the independent sense) as an aim: we do not necessarily require the ability to decimate the enemy's nuclear forces. For, except as our nuclear employment relates to the theater struggle, efforts to shift isolated (and therefore irrelevant) indicators of central nuclear strength are not very interesting.

Third, no damage-limiting effort per se is implied by this surrogate strategy. In particular, programmed offensive wherewithal needed to deter Soviet leaders contemplating theater aggression need not be complemented by other essential components of a damage-limiting strategy, such as extensive civil and active strategic defenses. The rationale behind this concept is that Soviet leaders would view their choices in military terms and not solely with respect to the indicator "lives saved/lost." If tight budgets constrain us to the choice either of frustrating theater attacks or limiting damage, we must select the former. This stipulation makes the strategy more affordable and makes it easier to balance nuclear force requirements with others in high-level deliberations on DoD top-lines.

Fourth, employment should be closely linked to the conflict at hand. That is, the new strategy does not imply that the U.S. would respond to Soviet action with nuclear weapons in one area by expansion or escalation in the costs or theaters of fighting unless that escalation seemed essential to impede and destroy the particular military developments that led to nuclear employment in the first place.

Fifth, the new strategy does not imply mirror-imaged attacks. In particular, trading target systems simply to draw down military inven-

tories may be a foolish strategy given crucial geographical and military asymmetries between the U.S. and USSR. For example, to reply to a Soviet nuclear attack on the U.S. Navy with a reciprocal blow would hardly restore overall balance, since NATO's defense is far more dependent on control of the seas than is that of the Soviet alliance with its interior lines of communication. U.S. retaliation therefore must be proportional to the objectives of Soviet attacks, and not to the specific characteristics of the attacks that further those aims.

Sixth, the strategy does not pursue punitive ends alone. The new U.S. strategy would notify the USSR that American planners have ruled out traditional, independent strategic nuclear operations, such as the counterforce and assured destruction contingencies which have figured prominently in U.S. planning to date in favor of operations that deal explicitly with the conflict at hand.[14]

#### SUMMARY: A THEATER-ORIENTED SURROGATE STRATEGY

Our fundamental nuclear defense planning goal--the tightest possible integration of policy and posture--probably is best brought about by

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[14] Note that we do not totally abandon the old stand-by, massive contingencies in this new framework. The more implausible independent strategic nuclear threats would be deterred in the same way, although the new theater-oriented surrogate strategy demotes these contingencies as bases for force and employment planning. Yet, as far removed as the canonical scenarios are, the consequences of uncontrolled escalation are so serious that we must keep them in mind. Retaining the standard planning scenarios does not mean, however, that the threat of escalation is the chief inducement to the USSR to desist from aggression. Rather, it is a form of specialized insurance. Credible deterrence does rely on our willingness to see challenges through. If we determine in advance that we will attempt to contain a war within a certain level of violence or intensity, we afford our adversary the privilege of going just slightly beyond that point with much more confidence than might otherwise be justified.

a surrogate strategy like the one described here. This reconnection by no means is the only step that could be taken to improve U.S. nuclear planning. However, the linkage of force and employment planning in the context of a theater-oriented deterrent strategy would yield prompt and significant rewards.

Thus, both U.S. strategy and force structure should be oriented as specifically as possible toward precisely defined enemy aggression in key theaters. For this reason, as many U.S. nuclear forces as possible should be appropriate for theater employment requirements, both to assure their effective use and to maximize the likelihood that fighting can be controlled. The exact form that employment options will take is naturally highly sensitive to the tactical situation, which obviously cannot be firmly characterized in advance. Clearly, some advance planning is mandatory. But, excluding the few canned contingencies that would remain, this planning should be devoted to classes of situation, with a final option tailored to the specifics of an emergency. As a general rule, it is inherently in our interest to avoid reliance on pre-planned attack options that are derivatives (even if diluted ones) of a strategic war philosophy based on the premise that nuclear fighting could exist apart from an ongoing war.

Modernized strategic forces are clearly required to ensure the fullest possible range of U.S. replies to Soviet aggression. Because this aggression might involve attacks by the Soviets' impressive, hard-target ICBM force, a survivable, controllable weapon system that destroys hard targets in a deliberate, second-strike context is a necessary item to procure. Similarly, the assured destruction scenario (another histori-

cal artifact of U.S. dedication to independent nuclear use that shapes the total force size and mix) should, over time, be placed on a special reserve status, to be used only should Soviet forces attack American or Allied targets of great economic or social value. Note that the forces required to satisfy these reserve missions, in terms of overall program size as well as weapon system characteristics, can be easily computed. Surely our hardest job is sizing and designing a new force for theater use that would be given the top nuclear forces budget priority.

In conclusion, we must reconnect our posture and plans that have come unlinked because of a misapplication of theories of how nuclear weapons can contribute to significant military leverage. Because current strategies cannot guarantee the termination of war before total destruction ensues, a new national nuclear strategy should link proposed nuclear employment plans as tightly as possible to specific enemy threats, including nuclear attacks, with an emphasis on major theater invasions. Appropriate use of U.S. nuclear forces might persuade the enemy to reevaluate his hostile intentions and reject the option to attack, or at least seek an end to fighting on terms consistent with overall U.S. objectives. In this way, we may find opportunities for negotiated settlement of hostilities on our own terms and at the lowest feasible level of damage.